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## Impossible Narratives: The Barcelona School and the European Avant-Gardes

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# IMPOSSIBLE NARRATIVES: THE BARCELONA SCHOOL AND THE EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDES

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**ABSTRACT** This article investigates the Barcelona School related to European leftist cultures of the 1960s, and in particular the intersection of critical theory with the political avant-gardes. Although the School's films seldom left Spain, the movement offers a crucial exemplar of the European avant-gardes' aesthetic and political impurity. The Barcelona School certainly lacks stylistic cohesion, but it has also been criticized as apolitical. This article argues that the School demonstrates an essential aspect of the European avant-gardes: by promiscuously combining forms, it speaks to (and from) the contested territories of European film culture. Theoretical debates on Marxism and culture linked the project of engaged cinema to the contested direction of the European left. And avant-gardist forms mixed uneasily with art cinema, exploitation genres and the global claims of Third Cinema. It is this rich mulch that accounts for the incoherence but also the complexity of the European avant-gardes. With its many international and multicultural links, the Barcelona School demonstrates the importance of the transnational to any understanding of European avant-garde film cultures.

Conjuring an insubordinate history of cinema, Nicole Brenez writes that "[t]he period 1965–1974 is probably the most fertile and most exciting in the history of forms and cinematic propositions, a veritable aesthetic volcano" (197). Such a statement should resonate for those interested in the Barcelona School, since it aligns closely with the period within which the Barcelona avant-garde was active in the final years of Francoism. But more telling than

a historical coincidence is Brenez's assertion that the events around May 1968 were not, as is often claimed, disappointing for film culture, but were in fact highly productive. Brenez points out the number of rebellious filmmakers whose names have not been incorporated into the canon, and indeed whose importance can be measured by the extent of their exclusion from hegemonic accounts of international cinema. It is necessary, she suggests, for scholars to develop a "counter-information" (197), making new cinematic connections that open onto the political. I want to follow this idea back to the years around 1968, when the Barcelona School filmmakers did just that, creating their own networks, counter to official film cultures, engaged with the aesthetic and political debates of the European avant-gardes. To tease out the historical shapes of these connections might form part of what Brenez calls a "rebellious and autonomous history" (198) of cinema, demanding that we locate the Barcelona School firmly within the contestatory culture of 1960s Europe. This article will investigate the Barcelona School in relation to the vicissitudes of European leftist cultures of the 1960s, and in particular the intersection of critical theory with the avant-gardes.

To think the Barcelona School in relation to the postwar European avant-gardes is to shift from the more commonly used historical reference points of the historic avant-garde and the French New Wave. While both of these movements undoubtedly had their influence, the effect of using them as anchors for historical analysis is to render the School politically and aesthetically inadequate. Antonio Sánchez tells us that "[t]he historical references of Spanish avant-garde cinema are often traced back to the surrealist films of Buñuel and Val del Omar and, to a lesser extent, avant-garde artists such as Dalí, Gómez de la Serna and Lorca, whose experiments in this modern medium mirrored the interest of other European avant-garde groups and artists at the beginning of the century" (105–06). The influence is always retrospective, figuring postwar avant-gardes as secondary and beholden to the aesthetic ideas of other times and places. While there are important material links between the Barcelona School and Buñuel, for example, this connection can too easily obscure the School's engagement with neo- rather than historic avant-gardes.

Equally problematic is a critical emphasis on the French New Wave. Joan Ramon Resina demonstrates the growing importance of the Barcelona School in Spanish film scholarship by opening his book with its opposition to the Nuevo Cine Español (NCE). Yet he finds it to be a failure in familiar terms: it is unable to be cosmopolitan, speaks only to a narrow upper-class

audience, and doesn't please a mass audience. The narrow view that only popular texts can exert cultural force is matched with a limited ambit of cinematic influence. For Resina, the school's failure is instantiated in the question of influence; he argues that it "tried to develop a cinema based on an international sensibility, though in fact indebted to the *nouvelle vague* of Truffaut and Godard" (3–4). Where a more successful movement might take an active role in international ideas, he implies, the Barcelona School simply copies Europe's most fashionable form of art cinema. In fact, I will argue, it is by reading the Barcelona School in reference to its avant-garde contemporaries that we can escape this narrative of inadequacy and locate its broad European significance.

If it is not art cinema, what makes the Barcelona School an avant-garde movement? Peter Bürger's influential account of the avant-garde asserts its specificity in its critique of the institution art, whereby "[t]he European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society" (49). This critique has a particular relevance for artists working under conditions of totalitarianism or state violence. For the Barcelona School filmmakers, the institution of art was entirely associated with the Francoist state, and they therefore avoided participating in its structures or producing its supposedly autonomous (but actually definitionally compromised) cultural products. Pere Portabella, for example, claims that he "sought out collaborators who had distanced themselves and were not deformed by the problems of cinema, in order to move forward in the search for an ethical cinematic language culturally rooted in our reality" (qtd. in Martín-Peralta 94). Iris Martín-Peralta explains how this meant excluding himself from the Francoist systems of cinema: "None of Portabella's films followed the normal procedures of production, distribution and circulation, for a clear and simple reason: He didn't want them to. He felt much more drawn to the extra-territorial space, to an underground, non-opportunistic environment; to a cinema dreamt up and created outside the system" (94). The Barcelona avant-garde is first and foremost an institutional position.

Joachín Jordá similarly argued for a radical shift in the cultural practices of cinema, claiming that while the School succeeded in their filmmaking aims, they were not able to change the possibilities for distribution and exhibition. (They were not completely able to escape the institutions of production either: some Barcelona School films benefited from the state category of films "*de interés especial*," which supported noncommercial production.) For Jordá, this problem of film's institutional life is closely linked to Franco-

ist censorship, but extends beyond Spain to encompass the capitalist structures that, he says, output only banality (Planas Gifreu 20). Arguing in favor of avant-gardism, Jordá denies that more populist cultural forms like the *nova cançó* would have more influence. Evolutionary movements, he insists, destroy themselves just as quickly as avant-gardes. This insistence on the need to speak outside of dominant institutions of art, coupled with a refusal of popular cultural representation as a solution, is entirely in keeping with Bürger's model of the avant-garde. For Bürger, the sublation of art into everyday life is not a question of "the means–end rationality of the bourgeois everyday" (49), but rather of developing a new praxis derived from art. This rejection of the institutions, forms, and popular culture of the Francoist state precisely tallies with what Resina sees as the Barcelona School's seclusion in the Boccaccio bar. It is not an "art for art's sake" rejection of the social but rather an opening onto a different organization of aesthetics and politics. As Bürger puts it, "Only an art the contents of whose individual works is wholly distinct from the (bad) praxis of the existing society can be . . . the starting point for the organization of a new life praxis" (49–50).

However, while Bürger's analysis of the avant-garde can be productively brought to bear on the Barcelona School, his influential account becomes still more interesting when we consider his more historically acute reading of the postwar avant-garde. For Bürger is a harsh critic of the art movements sometimes dubbed the neoavant-garde, finding them a pale echo of the historic avant-garde, lacking its political potency. He argues that "[t]he Neo-avant-garde, which stages for the second time the avant-gardiste break with tradition, becomes a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever" (61). Thus, he considers Warhol to offer no real resistance to commodity culture; a similar claim to that made by the critics who find *Cada vez que estoy enamorada creo que es para siempre* (Durán, 1967) to be complicit with Spain's burgeoning advertising regime (Hopewell 69; D'Lugo 131–46). If we situate the Barcelona School in the context of the neoavant-gardes, we find the debate over its political and aesthetic efficacy echoed across the fields of visual theory. Bürger's book was published in 1974, and it entered an already lively debate on the new avant-gardes. In 1971, for instance, Miklós Szabolcsi admitted that while the first postwar decades had been a retrenchment in which the avant-garde became a commodity and lost any political teeth, "around 1960 the situation changed, particularly in West-European literatures, but, to a smaller extent, in the Eastern socialist countries as well. It is from that time on that we are again

justified in speaking of avant-garde, or more accurately, a *neo-avant-garde*” (64). His focus on Europe rather than the US, and especially his inclusion of Eastern Europe, produces a more politically situated concept of the neo-avant-garde.

Benjamin Buchloh also sees a shift towards a political neoavant-garde, but places it slightly later, pointing to the rise of conceptualism and the emergence of artists such as Marcel Broodthaers and Daniel Buren. Like Szabolcsi, though, he sees a radical detachment from the legacy of the historic avant-garde that at the same time renovates its political potential (Buchloh xxiv). Writing retrospectively about the critical debates of the 1970s, Buchloh finds that both he and Bürger were wrong about how the political might be staged:

The second and equally fatal delusion shared by Bürger and this author to some extent . . . was the assumption that the criteria for aesthetic judgment would have to be linked at all times, if not to models of an outright instrumentalized political efficacy, then at least to a compulsory mode of critical negativity. Still, then and now, I would argue that one among the infinite multiplicity of functions intrinsic to aesthetic structures is in fact to provide at least an immediate and concrete illusion, if not an actual instantiation, of a universally accessible suspension of power. (xxiv)

Such a revision of the neoavant-garde debate illuminates the politics of the Barcelona School, which was not the kind of political discourse privileged by contemporary visual theorists, still less by the more Godardian or Althusserian wings of film theory. Much more Barthesian in tenor, a refusal of instrumentalized politics in favor of an aesthetic suspension of power elegantly describes the Barcelona School’s political proclivities.

From the linguistic play of *Dante no es únicamente severo* (Jordá and Esteva, 1967) and *Sexperiencias* (Nunes, 1968) through the *détournements* of ethnography in *Lejos de los árboles* (Esteva, 1963–1970) and *Alrededor de las salinas* (Esteva, 1962) and the deployment of pop art style in *Cada vez que . . .*, the Barcelona School works on and with the discourses of the neoavant-garde. Buchloh concludes that “the aesthetic structure dissolves all forms of domination, beginning with the dissolution of repression in whatever form it might have inscribed itself in codes and conventions: be they linguistic, specular, representational, or the behavioral structures of social interaction” (xxiv–xxv). His examples are not always in sympathy with the Barcelona School directors (the antispectacular work of Buren, for instance, would only

with the greatest effort reward comparison with Carlos Durán, although one might make a case for Portabella as a related artist) but the point is rather the turn against an overtly instrumentalized view of textual politics which also grows out of the '60s critical scene, albeit, as Buchloh describes his own history, gradually. In fact, the neoavant-garde formed a major locus for post-1968 critical theory, with the question of how different the new movements were from the historic avant-garde forming a way of posing questions of politics and aesthetics anew. We see in Buchloh's analysis of the neoavant-garde some of the strands of theoretical debate that most helpfully historicize the Barcelona School: language, spectacle, instrumentalism; Roland Barthes, Guy Debord, Theodor W. Adorno, Umberto Eco and Jean-Luc Godard.

If the neoavant-garde becomes in the 1970s the central term for understanding postwar artistic (and to some degree literary) innovation, the cinematic avant-garde gets defined in the same period by an equally canonical text, Peter Wollen's "The Two Avant-Gardes." Published in 1975, just a year after *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, "The Two Avant-Gardes" proposes a structuring split between a materialist avant-garde associated with the New American Cinema and the London Filmmakers' Co-op, and a more socially engaged avant-garde comprising mostly European filmmakers such as Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Marcel Hanoun and Miklós Jancsó. Where the first avant-garde is formally rigorous, artisanally produced and resolutely antinarrative, the second avant-garde includes more diverse textual strategies and intersects with art cinema and other more commercial institutions. Wollen is at pains to point out that this binary structure is not a North America vs. Europe division: British filmmakers like Malcolm LeGrice are clearly part of the materialist avant-garde, and we can find an originary version of the split within the European historic avant-garde, with L  ger, Man Ray, etc. on one side and Eisenstein and Vertov on the other (134). Nonetheless, he admits that there are few second avant-garde filmmakers in North America, and in many ways, the culture of engaged filmmaking from which second avant-garde work grows is characteristically European. I would argue that the Barcelona School is productively understood as an example of Wollen's second avant-garde, and that, while the second avant-garde is not essentially European, its European cultural and political history forms a uniquely productive constellation.

At first sight, the Barcelona School might not seem to fit with Wollen's model, since many of its texts are not so overtly *engag  * as Godard's work around May '68, or so formally austere as Straub-Huillet's. Part of the prob-



lem is the historical limitation of Wollen's examples. As Ian Christie points out, although Wollen's international analysis moves away from the national approach dominant in the late '60s, the films available at the time were limited, so that there was no institutional space for producing a broader picture of European avant-garde practice (8–9). Still, even within the limited range of references, we find some key areas of relevance to the Barcelona School. Wollen discusses the importance of intertextuality to the European avant-garde, where "the effect is to break up the homogeneity of the work, to open up spaces between different texts and types of discourse" (141). This discursive modality was a strategy explicitly deployed by the Barcelona School and, as we shall see, directly drawn from the work of Eco and Barthes. Wollen adds:

Godard has used the same strategy, not only on the sound track where whole passages from books are recited, but also on the picture-track, as in the quotations from the Hollywood western and the cinema novo in *Vent d'Est*. Similarly, the films of Straub–Huillet are almost all 'layered' like a palimpsest—in this case, the space between texts is not only semantic but historical too, the different textual strata being the residues of different epochs and cultures. (141)

We find similar layering in *Sexperiencias* where images of newspaper articles on the Vietnam war are combined with men chanting and the sounds of a football crowd, while the female protagonist's face and body are "written" with painted stick men, figuring the deaths in Southeast Asia (and closer to home) in a surreal corporeality. The Barcelona School produces another stratum of Wollen's palimpsestic layering, or cultural quotation, in which Catalan cinema takes its place in the engaged heterogeneity of the European avant-garde.

The connections become yet clearer if we think beyond Godard and Straub–Huillet to filmmakers like Ulrike Ottinger or Dušan Makavejev as interlocutors. Makavejev was a supporter of *Dante* when it played at the Pesaro Film Festival and the final passages of the film evoke the Yugoslav black wave. In a different register, the campy parade of models introducing themselves on the airport tarmac in *Cada vez que* is echoed in Ottinger's gender parodies—we might think of the parade of female pirates in *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1977). There is a promiscuity to this referentiality that is not simply a vagueness of definition. José Luis Guerin addresses the ques-

tion of reference explicitly in an interview in which he dismisses debates between Hollywood and what might be thought of as European art cinema. Arguing that there are great filmmakers and hacks on both sides of the divide, he demands to be able to draw influence as he pleases from Raoul Walsh or Michelangelo Antonioni. We already see here a refusal to play by certain cultural rules of engagement, but there follows a fascinating complication. Guerin goes on to recall debates in the Filmoteca de Barcelona between the cinema of Michael Snow and the so-called new engaged cinema (Angulo, Casas, and Torres 73). This binary recalls Wollen's two avant-gardes, except the counterpoint to Snow is not an avant-garde at all but Francesco Rosi, who illustrates a post-neorealist style that Guerin associates with the NCE and an inadequate possibilism. Thus, while he finds something valuable in both Hollywood and Europe, classicism and art cinema, he is quite clear in privileging Snow and the American avant-garde as a *political* opposition to the debased currency of post-neorealist compromise. This constellation of references limns a unique space for a European avant-garde, admitting influence from all fields except the cultural institutions of realism and the Francoist state.

There is a structuring impurity to Wollen's European avant-garde which matches the aims and practices of the Barcelona School, and explains exactly what makes the latter so hard to pin down. Many of Wollen's examples of the second avant-garde could as easily be categorized as art cinema (Jancsó, Angelopoulos) or, like Chris Marker, seem to resist definition altogether. However, I would argue that the Barcelona School demonstrates a crucial aspect of the European avant-gardes undervalued in Wollen's influential model: by promiscuously combining forms, it speaks to (and from) the contested territories of European film culture. Unlike the New American Cinema, the European avant-gardes of the '60s emerge from radically diverse political situations (Francoism, Titoism, state socialism, liberal democracy, etc.) and the forms engendered by these contexts bespeak not simply variety but a geopolitics of contestation. Jordá speaks of the influence of Skolimowski and Straub on his filmmaking, but adds that his encounter with them was only literary. He could read their critical writings in foreign journals, yet was unable to see their films (Riambau and Torreiro 200). This example tells a story about the enclosures of Francoism and the attenuated access that the Barcelona School directors had to European cultures, but it also illustrates synechdochically the condition of the European avant-gardes. Cultural and intellectual spaces are circumscribed, besieged and transformed in the '60s

and '70s, and the avant-gardes must be understood as negotiations of this territory. In Barcelona, avant-gardist forms mixed uneasily with art cinema, exploitation, and the global claims of Third Cinema. In France, Italy, and Poland theoretical debates on Marxism and culture linked the project of engaged cinema to the contested direction of the European left. It is this rich mulch that accounts for the incoherence but also the complexity of the European avant-gardes. In what follows, I aim to explore a few of the intersections between the Barcelona School and Europe's vanguardist critical cultures.

Central to these intersections is a conference organized in February 1967 by EINA, the newly established *Escola de Disseny i Art*, on the subject of avant-garde and engaged art (*EINA Historial d'activitats*). The event is famous largely for the participation of Eco and other Italian intellectuals, but before considering the influence of the visitors, it is useful to note the institutional location of EINA in the Barcelona critical scene. EINA was created in 1967, after a mass resignation from Elisava, the design school affiliated with the Catholic Church. Elisava had fired Román Gubern, who taught film history and was associated closely with the Barcelona School, for his supposedly scandalous approach to teaching visual culture. This event kickstarted a campaign by both students and faculty that led to the formation of EINA as an independent school, founded on liberal ideas of cultivating freedom and humanistic inquiry, and engaging new critical perspectives, especially those humanities theories based in linguistics. In other words, EINA emerged as a politically and theoretically radical space in which filmmakers and scholars might think in an interdisciplinary way, with semiotics and European critical theory written in from the outset. Moreover, Gubern's sacking places cinema at the heart of this radical reimagining of public culture.

Gubern participated in the 1967 conference, along with architects Oriol Bohigas and Ricardo Bofill, painter Antoni Tàpies, art critic Alexandre Cirici and poet José Goytisolo. This diverse group of Barcelona artists and intellectuals gathered to share the work of the Italian Gruppo 63: the visitors represented an impressive roster of neoavant-garde writers including Eco, Nanni Balestrini, Renato Barilli, Angelo Guglielmi and Giorgio Manganelli. The influence of this conference was hugely significant in disseminating structuralism and semiotics in Catalonia, and in creating dynamic links between the Barcelona avant-gardes and their European counterparts. As an institution, EINA continues to place a high value on this inaugural event; for instance, their website states that the conference influenced Catalan cultural life and

led to the strong development of semiotics in the work of both students and scholars (*EINA Historial d'activitats*). Practically, a direct consequence was the introduction of an annual seminar at EINA to study the application of structuralist ideas and aesthetics. Thus, in 1968–1969 the seminar included Gubern's writing on comic books, as well as sessions on structuralism, film and architecture, and the situation of students in France. The potential of structuralism to analyze media and popular culture was closely linked both to political radicalism and the aesthetic radicalism of the avant-garde.

The EINA conference represents a material link between the Barcelona School and several key strands of European critical culture. This connection is fairly well known and is mentioned in the main history of the School (Riambau and Torreiro 45). Gubern himself claims that the event prompted the translation and publication of books on semiotics in Barcelona, and that, for the Barcelona School, “[t]he doors open[ed] to contemporary European culture” (qtd. in Aubert 9). Art critic and friend of the Barcelona School Cirici agreed, writing in April 1967 that “[e]verything points to the fact that these days of February . . . will constitute an important historical date for our culture” (67). That the Italian writers had an impact on the formation of the Barcelona avant-garde is in no doubt. But if the fact of the conference has been noted by commentators, the intellectual connections between the Barcelona School and Gruppo 63 have not yet been seriously explored. The formal and ideological debates that animated the Gruppo 63 in Italy were closely aligned with those taken up by the Barcelona School, so that an examination of the Italian critical context can shed light on the formation of the Catalan avant-garde. It is a question of influence, but also of commonality: the rejection of the realist cultural heritage, alongside a politically committed aesthetic theory forms an uneven but legible continental discourse.

Like the Barcelona School, the Gruppo 63 first appears as a turn away from the legacy of neorealism. As Szabolcsi puts it, “This neo-avant-garde followed the pattern of the French linguistic revolution; it resulted from disappointment with the dominant literary styles, neo-realism in particular. Neo-realism fell short of adequately representing the new, more complicated and less conspicuous class divisions and differences, the new types of social conflicts” (68). Instead of realist forms, the Italian neoavant-garde turned to experimental poetics. The anthology *I Novissimi* was published in 1961, including poetry by Balestrini, Antonio Porta and others, and the group took on the name Gruppo 63 after their October 1963 meeting in Palermo. Drawing on Eco's influential *Opera aperta*, they rejected readability and textual

closure for an “informal art” whose indeterminacy and poetic fragmentation allowed for “a number of possible readings” and “len[t] themselves to all sorts of reciprocal relationships” (Eco 84). In Linda Hutcheon’s words, the group stood in “opposition to the dogma and conformity that was solidifying and immobilizing Italian culture. . . . Out of this fertile ground sprang the novelists of the neoavant-garde, bringing to the narrative genre a poetic inventiveness of form unknown to previous Italian fiction” (199). It was this mobilization of poetic language to combat lumpen artistic conformity that resonated with the EINA participants. Cirici writes approvingly that Gruppo 63 “was formed when it was clear that one must work with artistic language in order to struggle against the establishment” (67).

While the opposition to neorealism bespeaks an Italian specificity, Gruppo 63 also opposed inward-looking cultural nationalism. As well as forging connections in Barcelona, they made common cause with *Tel Quel* and French critical theory, the German Gruppe 47 (whose members included avant-garde filmmaker Alexander Kluge) and crossnational movements like musical serialism. Moreover, the Italian group shared an antirealist impetus with the Eastern European neoavant-gardes, including the Polish writer Sławomir Mrożek and filmmaker Józef Robakowski. Robakowski, like many East European avant-garde filmmakers (see also the work of Jan Svankmajer) takes up the structuralist critique of dominant languages, as well as drawing from aspects of the historic avant-garde such as surrealism and the grotesque. This opening of aesthetic territories stands at the heart of the neoavant-garde’s Europeanness. If neorealism participated in a national struggle over representation in Italy, its rejection echoed powerfully for artists refusing socialist realism as well as the possibilism of the NCE. Gruppo 63 modeled an interdisciplinary and international avant-garde culture, engaged in what Florian Mussgnug has described as “a radical renewal of verbal language” (82).

This poetics was also, of course, a politics. The theoretical writings of Eco and Edoardo Sanguineti insisted that ideology operated through linguistic structures and that a refusal of realist form was also the only possibility for an artistic engagement with modern capitalism. Eco’s *Opera aperta* set the theoretical tone for the group’s combination of linguistic theory and literary radicality, and his work in the ’60s includes *La struttura assente* and *La definizione dell’arte* (both 1968). Eco moves from a structuralist to a semiotic position over the decade, partly in response to criticism of structuralism’s lack of political radicality. Throughout the period, however, his ideas of textual openness propose a form of discourse in confrontation with mediatized

commodity culture. Meanwhile, Sanguineti's criticism emphasized the intersections of ideology and the avant-garde. In 1965 he published *Ideologia e linguaggio*, which included the essays "Spora l'avanguardia" and "Avanguardia, società, impegno." In an interview published in *Tel Quel* in 1967, he argued that conventional literary language is not neutral but ideologically complicit, and that a revolutionary form is necessary to resist such complicity (Sanguineti 76–95). The poetic language advocated by the group deployed fragmentation and collage to produce in the reader a radical alienation from conventional forms of language and an active participation in meaning production. This argument predates Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's similar polemic in their seminal *Cahiers du Cinéma* article "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" by two years, and demonstrates the centrality of the neo-avant-garde's theory and practice to the development of European film theory.

As in the Barcelona School, there was something of an internal debate in the Gruppo 63 around the proper relationship of aesthetics to politics, and this split was reflected in those who attended the EINA conference. While Sanguineti did not attend, Eco and especially Balestrini represented the more politically engaged wing of the group. Balestrini had published novels and poetry before the 1967 conference, as well as exhibiting gallery work and taking part in experimental theater. But in 1968, he temporarily gave up his own artistic output to focus on documenting the workers' movements, and he was a foundational member of *Potere Operaio*, along with Antonio Negri. This close connection of left activism and experimental form echoes in the Barcelona School: Jordá left Spain following the events of 1968 and settled in Italy, where he made two films in collaboration with the Italian Communist Party before giving up filmmaking for fulltime political activism. Portabella followed the radical form of *No compteu amb els dits* (1967) with engaged documentaries *Advocats laboralistes* (1972) and *El Sopar* (1974). The latter interviewed political prisoners of Franco, and was made clandestinely, producing the filmmakers as well as the subjects as anti-Franco activists. Indeed, Portabella had already found himself in trouble with the regime over *Viridiana* (Buñuel, 1961), which he produced, and after the return to democracy, he became a leftwing senator in the Catalan assembly. He also continues to make experimental work, and his recent films and installations have been shown at the Pesaro Film Festival and at Documenta.

The less activist element in the Gruppo 63 was represented at EINA by Guglielmi and Manganelli, both of whom emphasized the autonomy of literature over its political force. Guglielmi spoke against the operative function

of literature, arguing that forcing art to articulate politics risked an instrumentalization that could end with the leaden forms of socialist realism (Hutcheon 201). Manganelli similarly located the power of literature in its fantastical nature, and in his 1967 book *La letteratura come menzogna*, he lauded a “left-handed” literature, outside of the norms of proper representation (50). This aspect of the Gruppo 63 is clearly not entirely apolitical. The heretical power of literature is precisely its ability to speak otherwise, to counter dominant regimes of representation. And because of the ambivalence inherent in their determination to locate art in the work of the signifier, this aspect of the Gruppo 63 also finds a correlation in the Barcelona School. Many critics of the school dismissed it as apolitical, a retreat from the social into a rarified world of art. Resina is exemplary here, accusing it of failing to be cosmopolitan or even local, relevant only “in the upper-class districts of Sarrià and Sant Gervasi” (3). But to see the school’s semiotically complex films as apolitical forecloses on any politics of cinematic form. Guglielmi and Manganelli’s approach to literature thus speaks to the Barcelona School on several levels. First, the claim of poetic language as a privileged locus of social heresy is enabling in a situation where more direct activism or speech was impossible. Second, the claim of autonomy, moving away from realist politics, appeals as an escape from the clutches of useless neorealist moralizing. For Barcelona School directors, the field of linguistic experimentation becomes the only possible space for an alternative praxis.

Comparison with the critical reception of the Italian neoavant-garde helps bring into view the significance of this “purely linguistic” experimentation. The reader notices immediately the similarities between descriptions of the neoavant-garde and the Barcelona School. Romano Luperini found that the former “took delight in artistic contamination, a playfulness that verged on futility, an emphasis on language in isolation, considered in all its artificiality” (170). These terms evoke the generic mixing of *Vampir-Cuadecuc* (Portabella 1970), the referentiality of *Dante*, the play of advertising and apocalyptic loss in *Fata Morgana* (Aranda 1965), and above all the artifice that runs throughout the School’s films. Moreover, those critics hostile to the neoavant-garde make attacks markedly similar to those used against the Barcelona School. Hutcheon notes that the Gruppo 63 was accused of being unreadable, overemphasizing language over social content, and being self-indulgent in their linguistic play (205). Pier Paolo Pasolini (not always a friend to leftist activists himself) called the neoavant-garde a “paper bomb” offering no real radicality (qtd. in Re 141). The aesthetico-political debates

that animated late 1960s Barcelona were thus being reiterated in Italy and across the continent. But while the Barcelona School is still often seen as ineffective, contemporary readers of the neoavant-garde acknowledge its historical influence. Hutcheon argues that it did more than anyone else to liberate the Italian novel from neorealism, and Lucia Re concludes that “[t]he Italian neo-avant-garde at its best probed the linguistic and political unconscious of the dominant bourgeois culture and of the new Italian consumer society, exposing their alienation and repressiveness and, at the same time, working with the liberatory potential of their contradictions” (155). We can say the same of the Barcelona School.

The association with the Italian neoavant-garde is the strongest of the Barcelona School’s international links, but it is by no means the only one. It is outside the scope of this article to tease out all of the School’s manifold intersections with the European avant-gardes, but if we return to the EINA conference, we can trace tentacular influences spreading across Europe and beyond. In following some of these strands, we can concretize the transnational quality of the Barcelona School, a quality which is often claimed as a feature of Catalan culture, but which also manifests the geopolitical specificity of the European avant-gardes.

The success of the 1967 event led to the institution of an annual seminar, drawing scholars and artists from various countries to speak in Barcelona. In 1968 the topic was aesthetics, and the speakers continued to engage the question of the political. Jordi Borja presented on students and the situation in France, drawing connections between the activism that would soon bloom into *les événements* of May and radical theories of urbanism and public space. Borja himself was exiled in France for much of the 1960s, so his own history figures a Catalan transnationalism born of political necessity. Also from France was the seminar’s most famous guest, Roland Barthes, whose topic was “Linguistic Interpretation of a Work by Balzac.” Presenting material from what would become *S/Z*, Barthes’s involvement in the seminar highlights the importance of French critical theory for the Barcelona School’s radical practice.

The decentering of meaning that Barthes unpicks in *S/Z*, where he lauds “the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (5), forms a major strategy for the Barcelona School filmmakers. Plurality and openness abound in *Sexperiencias*, *Fata Morgana* and *Vampir-Cuadecuc*, and their determined ambiguity of meaning help produce the heterogeneity and layering that Wollen associates with the European avant-



gardes. Riambau and Torreiro write that “la EdB representó la irrupción de la consciencia lingüística del medio en el cine español de los sesenta” (240), and this play with the structures of cinematic enunciation, along with a refusal of transparency, also bespeaks a Barthesian overthrowing of textual authority. Jordá himself speaks cogently of Barthes’s influence on *Dante*:

Era una idea muy de aquel tiempo, relacionada con textos de los semiólogos estructuralistas franceses, como Roland Barthes, a los que me sentía muy afin: la imposibilidad de la narración. Aunque tal vez sea mejor decir: la fragmentariedad y la dislocación como único hilo conductor de un discurso narrativo, que podía tener diferentes sentidos, e incluso carecer por completo de él, según el orden aleatorio en que se barajaran sus elementos. (97)

*Dante* is thus very much a Barthesian text, organized around the plurality of language and the impossibility of univocality.

Indeed, the film was initially intended as a portmanteau, combining shorts by Jordá, Esteva, Portabella, Gonzalo Suárez, Antonio de Senillosa and Ricardo Bofill. However, only Esteva and Jordá made their sections, and Jordá reconceptualized the film, adding extra scenes to create a single but fragmentary narrative. Even in its final form, it refuses narrative coherence at every turn. At the beginning of the film, women talk to the camera in various different languages, denaturalizing spoken language in preparation for the film’s disintegration of cinematic language. The rest of the film consists of a series of failed narratives as the protagonist tells stories to her partner, Scheherazade-style. The stories are characterized by their allusiveness and linguistic multiplicity: one tale references Julio Cortázar’s short story “Axolotl” while others deploy archive newsreel footage and medical films to serve new purposes. Footage of an accidental fire is presented as evidence of war, while educational shots of eye surgery are redeployed as shocking interruptions to spectatorial suture. Aubert has usefully related this fragmentation of enunciation to the crisis of signification addressed by both Barthes and Eco, but we should also note the determined transnationality of these references.

As the confluence of the French student movement and Barthes at the 1968 seminar makes clear, French theory was of value to the Barcelona School in part because of its close affiliation of literary avant-gardism and radical politics. The *Tel Quel* editors wrote in 1968 that “[w]hat is at stake is to increase the rupture of the symbolic system in which the modern West has lived and

will continue to live" (22–23), and this investment in rewriting the symbolic order is an important influence on the Barcelona School in its definition of avant-garde style as a mode of political engagement. The links between the Barcelona School and *Tel Quel* are more attenuated than those with the Gruppo 63, but they nonetheless continue to trace a network of European avant-garde influence. The presence of Barthes (a frequent contributor to the journal) at EINA is the most direct connection, but *Tel Quel* in the 1960s forms a center for European avant-gardism and, like many other national movements, the Catalan avant-garde was strongly influenced by it.

From the early 1960s, *Tel Quel* championed avant-garde literature, and throughout the decade, it published work that intersects with the interests of the Barcelona School. In 1962, an early section of Eco's *Opera aperta* appears, and in 1964 the journal aligns itself with the Italian neoavant-garde by publishing Sanguineti. Also significant is Jean-Louis Baudry's place on the *Tel Quel* editorial board, linking what was a primarily literary avant-gardism to Marxist film theory and, by 1970, his influential ideology critique of the cinematic apparatus. We can hear an echo of this inheritance in Jordá's famous claim that "if we can't be Victor Hugo, let's be Mallarmé" (qtd. in Higginbotham 65). Taken by the School's critics as a retreat from the social into a purely aesthetic world, the importance of Mallarmé for *Tel Quel* suggests another interpretation. Philippe Sollers's "Literature and Totality," published only a year before Jordá's statement, takes Mallarmé as a key example of literature's radicality, and in 1974's *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Julia Kristeva reads Mallarmé as exemplary of the semiotic. In the Spanish context, Jordá's evocation of Mallarmé reads in the first instance as a way to speak when direct political articulation is impossible. But it is clearly inadequate to see avant-gardism as merely a convenient evasion of censorship. *Tel Quel* places the question of avant-garde form at the heart of European critical theory, and the Barcelona School represents a Catalan presence, albeit necessarily distanced, in this debate.

Jordá's invocation of Mallarmé, meanwhile, took place at the Pesaro Film Festival in 1967, on one of the few occasions that Barcelona School directors were able to travel outside of Spain. Reuniting the School with Eco just a few months after the EINA conference, Jordá's trip (with codirector Esteva) provides another set of intersections with European critical theory and avant-garde practice. At Pesaro, Eco represented not so much the literary avant-garde but Italian semiotics, and he was joined at a roundtable panel by film theorists and semioticians such as Pio Baldelli and Emilio Garroni, as well as

major international theorists such as Christian Metz. The Italian participants at Pesaro were enormously influential in the development of Italian semiotics; Garroni, for instance, published *Semiotica ed estetica* in 1968 and was one of Eco's major interlocutors. They were also central to debates in European Marxism. Galvano della Volpe was a controversial figure on the Italian left, while Baldelli wrote on leftist film theory, with books including *Cinema e lotta di liberazione* (1970) and *Informazione e controinformazione* (1972). Beyond the Italian critical scene, the festival roundtables in the late 1960s proved a hothouse for debating film semiotics and politics, with the encounters between Pasolini and Metz, and Barthes and Luc Moullet drawing the battle lines for some of the central debates in 1970s film theory. Jordá and Esteva attended some of these key critical sessions, and indeed *Dante* itself provoked argument between those more conventional Marxist critics and filmmakers who disliked its radical form and those, like Makavejev, who applauded it.

Pesaro provided a space in film studies for some of the same encounters that the Gruppo 63 and *Tel Quel* made possible in literature—that is to say, lively debates on aesthetics and politics, and on how to integrate the theoretical insights of structuralism and semiotics into textual production and analysis. Here, too, filmmakers met with cultural critics and found that the claims of radical form did not always match up seamlessly with those of radical theory. Godard, for example, clashed with Barthes on the value of structuralism for political cinema (Godard 26), while Pasolini and Metz fought over semiotics and the nature of the cinematic signifier (Micciché 199–244). But even more than the literary groups, Pesaro nourished a determinedly international debate, situating film theory as a question of the geopolitics of film forms. The 1967 panels included Eastern European contributors such as Eva and Jiri Struska from Czechoslovakia, and engaged filmmakers attended from around the world. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea writes of his experiences at the festival:

I remember the first round tables where Christian Metz, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Roland Barthes, and others argued mainly about film and linguistics, and then increasingly—bit by bit—about film and politics. There was Cinema Novo from Brazil, the New American Cinema, the underground, parallel cinema, militant cinema, revolutionary cinema. That was where we first got to know the work that bespoke the spirit of renewal abroad in the cinema of different countries. (199)

At Pesaro, Jordá and Esteva encountered radical cinemas from outside Europe, an experience that must surely have aided Esteva in his collaboration with Glauber Rocha producing *Cabezas cortadas* in 1970.

One more international tentacle unfurls from Jordá and Esteva's trip to Pesaro. Before returning to Spain, Jordá took advantage of his ability to travel freely and went to the South of France to meet with Witold Gombrowicz, the Polish avant-garde novelist in exile (Riambau and Torreiro 317). He hoped to acquire the rights to film Gombrowicz's novel *Cosmos*, a mystery of sorts that plays extensively with openness and linguistic uncertainty. Gombrowicz is often read in the context of structuralism, and indeed, in a 1967 interview he says (with amusingly false modesty), "I read here and there, a little of Greimas, Bourdieu, Jacobson, Macherey, Ehrmann, Barbut, Althusser, Bopp, Levi-Strauss . . . Foucault, Genette, Godelier . . . Marx . . . Lacan and Poulet, and also Goldmann, Starobinski, Barthes . . . As you see, I am very current" (qtd. in Płonowska Ziarek 14). Both men, then, were closely involved in both the European structuralist debate and in experimental forms, so it is natural that Jordá would be drawn to Gombrowicz's text. But just as important as these aesthetic and intellectual commonalities is the geopolitics of censorship and exclusion that Gombrowicz, as a Pole, shared with Jordá. Gombrowicz left Poland for Argentina in 1939 and remained censored in Poland throughout his life. That he was trapped in France, unable to go home, could not have failed to resonate with Jordá, who had only left Spain under stringent conditions and would have his passport confiscated on his return. (The adaptation of *Cosmos* fell through largely as a result of Jordá's having claimed Catalan as his language in Pesaro, which led not only to his passport being confiscated but also to his being refused funding for future projects.) Moreover, Gombrowicz's writing stages these very problems of identity. Silvana Mandolessi finds in it a reflection on the meaning of belonging to a marginal culture—both Poland as marginal within Europe and Argentina as marginal to Europe—and argues that "[i]n this sense, belonging to 'secondary' countries is related to the permanent tension that the idea of 'Europe' represents for these 'minor' cultures" (151). If the "primary" European avant-gardes in France, Italy and Germany view their peripheral counterparts as, in Ewa Płonowska Ziarek's words, "lagging behind," (17) then both Gombrowicz and the Barcelona School insist that we insert geopolitics back into the debate on radical aesthetics.

In a recent article on the relationship of art cinema to the underground, Mark Betz makes the point that the inversion of values by which popular

cinema has become *de rigueur* in film studies and art film a guilty pleasure is, paradoxically, largely a consequence of the Marxist and semiotic transformation in European film theory that, at the time, also nourished art cinema (202–03). This paradox must, I think, be extended to the European avant-gardes and has particular relevance to the Barcelona School. While the School was formed through a rich conversation with European critical theories of structuralism, semiotics and Marxism, the adoption of these same theoretical methods within 1970s film studies led to the Barcelona School's being ignored in favor of more popular genres. Wollen's seminal article notwithstanding, little scholarship has explored the European cinematic avant-gardes in the generation since the Barcelona School's flourishing. Ironically, this critical split between avant-garde and popular culture was not at all the lesson that the Barcelona School learned from their encounters with European critical theory. In the underground journal *La Mosca*, which emerged briefly from the EINA conference and was edited by Barcelona School figures including Ricardo Muñoz Suay, popular culture mixed promiscuously with high art in the manner of Barthes's *Mythologies* or Eco's semiotics (Mazquiarán de Rodríguez 35–49). An article on *Peanuts* cartoons shared space with analyses of the new novel and an interview with Theodor W. Adorno.

Muñoz Suay himself embodies this principle of cultural openness: a journalist and critic who was often seen as the voice of the Barcelona School, he was a producer of *Viridiana* and *Cabezas cortadas*, and also, in the 1970s, of a number of horror films including *La saga de los Drácula* (Klimovsky 1973) and *El espanto surge de la tumba* (Aured 1973). His film writing—including, according to Mazquiarán de Rodríguez, a translation of Sergei Eisenstein's writing on genre film (44)—forms another crossroads of European film theory with avant-garde and popular cultures. And for him, as for the school's directors, this intersection is always dependent on the institutions within which art takes place. In *La Mosca*, Muñoz Suay discussed the development of arthouse cinemas and argued that these shouldn't be elite ghettos but should show the “most recent, polemic and independent films which represented an ideological or linguistic rupture with mainstream cinema” (qtd. in Mazquiarán de Rodríguez 43). In other words, to return to Bürger's terms, avant-garde culture should become the starting point for the organization of a new life praxis. A closer analysis of the Barcelona School's complex engagement with European avant-garde cultures, then, might not only add to our knowledge of Catalan culture in the 1960s, but also offers insight into the intertwined European histories of radical film theories and practices. With

its links to Barthes and Eco, to Pesaro and Paris (to say nothing of Poland and Brazil), the Barcelona School challenges us to reevaluate the place of geopolitics in both postclassical film theory and European avant-garde cultures.

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